

3: Harrisson N-5 (1934-1935) 1936

OO12 Malekula OO12

Pygmies
Nambas

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Pygmoid people from central South Malekula



Middle Nambas of North Malekula

[facing p. 332]

THE NEW HEBRIDES PEOPLE AND CULTURE

T. H. HARRISON

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THE New Hebrides and Banks Islands natives have not been described as a unit, and our knowledge of south-central islands culture is still practically nil. The north and south parts of the group have matrilineal descent, but in the centre descent is patrilineal, this being almost certainly the later evolved form. The patrilineal people have two regular characteristics: slit gongs placed upright and a skull cult. The penis wrapper and incision are patrilineal and southern matrilineal, but do not occur in the northern matrilineal section, where the men wear hanging mats or go naked. Female clothing has a typically complex distribution; in the Banks a narrow *tapa* strip, in Santo a tiny leaf strip, in the north-eastern and central islands a red mat, in north Malekula a fringed mat, central Malekula fibrous skirt, south Malekula a plain mat, the southernmost isles a large fibre skirt, very elaborate on Erromango (Humphreys, 1927).

Secret societies have a wide distribution, but the secular graded society (*Sukwe* or *Maki*), the principle feature of life in north and centre, is absent in the south. Stone work is used in connection with this society except in north-east Santo. Hereditary chieftainship dominates the southern isles, but in the north only occurs among the Big Nambas. Remarkable are the long-headed deformation people of south Malekula, with a most elaborate secret-society culture. Totemism has a most erratic distribution, as has the use of *kava*. The most southerly islands have dominantly curvilinear art, but in the north angularity is regular. A benign ancestor-creator, with obvious affinities to Polynesian Tangaroa, is universal and of probably later origin via Omba and Malo, while Maui, the earlier Polynesian deity, is confined to the southern islands (cf. Williamson, 1924). The importance of the colour red and a rank society for women have a correlated distribution in the north-east and north-centre; splendid pantomimic dances, *na-leng*, the highest manifestation of native art, have a similar distribution, but occur again in simpler form in the southern isles. These too are later influences, as also a form of sacrifice on a stone table. The exact nature and effect of the many haphazard and subsidiary distributions of ideas that have occurred in these islands are being studied by Layard and myself.

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The local variation and complexity of this culture is astonishing. There is apparently no single item which is found uniformly throughout the group. Some things have a wide distribution, such as the word-root *mal* connected with the hawk, megapode, and rituals in which these are concerned; a many-barbed spear of casuarina wood; the term for child *natuk*; the ritual importance of tusker pigs; pandean pipes, though these vary greatly in form and usage. Of special interest as culturally peculiar are the Sakaus, with the simplest culture in the area; the communal house hill people of Santo; the Big Nambas and fibre-skirt tribes of Malekula. I am unable to decide which, if any, of these is the earliest and most truly Melanesian form. Our whole attitude to this problem must be revised before knowledge can advance.

Within the tribe the shape, architecture, and type of house built is constant,

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Tomman Island canoe and long-headed men

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Clearing for a garden in South Malekula

[facing p. 333]

but there is a big range of inter-tribal difference; take several islands and the variety is great. Curved houses seem to be found only in south Malekula, Ureparapara of the Banks (cf. Speiser, 1913, Pl. 15), and the southern islands of the group, an extraordinary distribution. To understand the development and organization of the village only structurally, a full study of each particular unit is necessary.

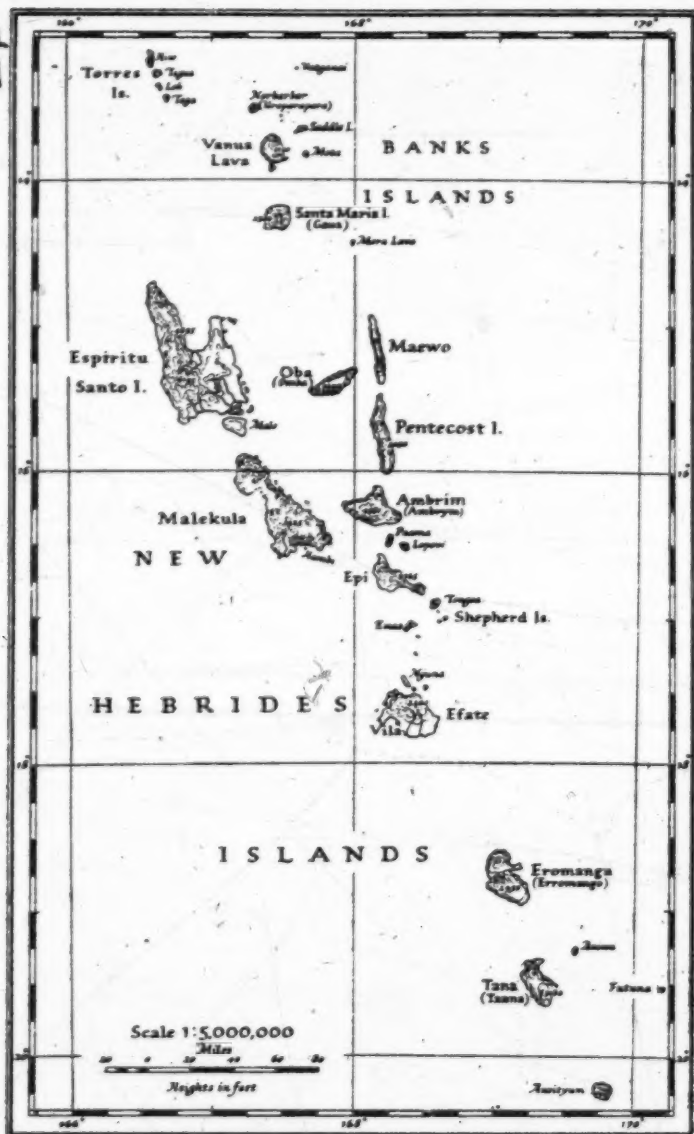
Speiser (1913) has said something of the distribution of stone works. Stone pudding-basins are confined to Big Bay. I was interested in stone axes, of which I made a considerable collection. Remarkable stone basins, "witching-vats," are confined to Gaua, where Mrs. Baker and I also found a stone effigy (Baker, 1935). In one small area of south-west Santo, around the village of Tavua, the stone axes are entirely distinct from all others in the group, being very slender and long in relation to their breadth. Shell axes do not occur in Santo, but are common in Malekula; in the Big Nambas there are some ritual clubs that seem to be made out of fossilized squid's cuttles, very long and heavy.

War-clubs are curved only in north-east Santo; long stick clubs are confined to the northern islands; paddle clubs characteristic of Malekula are absent on Santo. The Santo and Malo bows are regularly arched; in south and east Malekula the concavity is uneven, greater in the lower half. Feathered spear shafts are apparently confined to north Malekula and islets; fearful spear-tips of serried human bones only in Santo. Feather-shafted arrows I have not seen in Santo, but Speiser reports them from Big Bay, and there are two without locality in the Cambridge Ethnological Museum; in certain *na-leng* dances of north Malekula, feathered arrows are used. Combs worn in the hair show wide pattern range; a triangular form I have only seen on Gaua, and ones with handles decorated by pigs' bristles are confined to Sakau, Santo.

The distribution of *kava* is curious. It has a very local usage in north Malekula, where it is chewed and spat into a trough; is not used in south Malekula; in Sakau, Santo, the stalk is chewed; elsewhere in Santo the root is chewed and spat out into coconut shells (only by chiefs in part of the north-west), except around Turi, where it is absent. In the eastern islands *kava* is generally used green, crushed with a stone pounder. On Malo it is seldom used unless in magical rites.

There is a fair uniformity in the type of mixed bisexual dances connected with the graded society; the musical instruments vary more. Pan-pipes are the most important in north-west Santo; though widespread, these are seldom used for dances elsewhere; they are semi-sacred in central Malekula; into Sakau and Malekula the pan-pipes have been recently introduced. On Malo and in east Santo bamboos beaten on the ground are the main dance accompaniment; the former type is close to a large flute figured by Speiser (1913, Pl. 108). The nose-flute is used in Sakau; musical bow in central-south Malekula. Slit gongs are always upright in the patrilineal central islands, reclined in the northern islands. Sticks tapped together have developed into a dance band in the Big Nambas. Bone knives are common in south Malekula, but nowhere else have I found one; wooden knives are absent in Malekula, crude in Malo and W. Santo, elaborate in the Banks Islands.

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Tattoo is elaborately humanistic in the Banks Islands; simpler on Pentecost, 191
with occasional spirals and circles; intricately angular on Omba; on Santo 304
simple geometric patterns, almost entirely non-representative. Scarification
replaces tattoo in Sakau. On Malekula I have not seen tattoo.

I found that chance, individuality, error, misinterpretation, war, and wind 174
were most important in determining the cultures I investigated; these are
allowed no place anywhere in Rivers' 'History of Melanesian Society' (1914).
I have also much evidence for the spread of ideas and objects ahead or inde-
pendent of the people who originally brought them, often accidentally,
to one point. There is little evidence to be found for logical coherent
waves of the Riversian "*kava* people" type into this part of Melanesia. And
whereas movements have generally been considered to pass from the
north southwards, there is no doubt that the two most obvious diffusions
which I have been able to trace spread westward from Omba, which was
almost certainly effected from the east, and northward from Efate through
Emae, Tongoa, Hambi to south Malekula; important culture traits in Santo
have largely been derived from Malo to the south. After studying the litera-
ture and the people themselves, I have come to the conclusion that the culture
of south Melanesia is even more complex than had previously been supposed.
Far more data are needed to make any broad generalizations valuable. There
are still whole islands about whose culture we know nothing. The forthcoming
work of Layard, and to a lesser extent my own, will I think demonstrate that
some of the north Malekulan and Atchin traits can be associated with ritual
or belief all over the Pacific and in much remoter parts of the world. These
islands seem to have received the last flickers and backwashes from every step
in world evolution: that is true for the period of white influence too.

Present position in the Group

The white is in general disliked by the native: mission natives sometimes 648
like their missionaries. What respect black has for white is founded on what
the former calls the latter's "cleverness"—the things he can make, his tinned
sardines and launch engines. Among many peoples now, especially on Omba,
Efate, Tongoa, and Nguna, there is a dawning determination to have some say
in their own affairs. Now the natives have no control of any sort; they know
they are being underpaid or misused. Their lack of unity has been and is the
main obstacle to reform. Land in particular will be a future problem. On
some islands the French claim more land than there is above water; they
vigorously curtail the expansion of the native in every direction, and notably
on Aore and Malo have driven out whole villages. Among the bushmen
anti-white feeling is generally strong but passive; for here there is little
concern with the small world outside. And whereas the bushmen are without
exception decreasing, the coastal peoples in many parts, and invariably when
close to a missionary and his medicines, are increasing.

On the basis of a very detailed study (to be published elsewhere) I am con- 648
vinced that a hundred and fifty years ago there were not less than one million
natives in the group; there are now about forty-five thousand. "Civilization"
has crept on, though perhaps more slowly than anywhere else in the world.
It is the missionary and the germ that has made the coast safe for civilization.

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From the first missionary, John Williams, murdered in 1839, until the present day, these devoted men, working according to their own lights, meeting often with sudden death, have been the only influence for good and sanity of any sort; even had they accomplished nothing, the missionaries would be the best people in island history. It was not always the Mission who converted the people or disrupted the native civilization. It was the chaos of endless new unknown diseases, the fundamental cultural upset due to iron and firearms. In seeking protection from these and from the other whites who brought them, the natives came to the missionary. The early records of the group are a ghastly list of introduced diseases—scarlet fever, measles, consumption, smallpox, phthisis, gonorrhoea, whooping cough, influenza, diphtheria, meningitis—all fatal to these people. The population, particularly where it was much in contact with whites, was decimated. Their culture was based on a certain speed, rhythm, and age-cycle; the sudden death of artist, magician, or chief upset the whole. The old beliefs, ancient gods, counter-magics, and native herbs, could do nothing; so they turned to the white man's god, who must be stronger than their own. The new trend among the missionized people, as it gathers internal momentum, shows signs of turning against its instigators, the white missionaries. So far experiments in founding a native-run church have regularly failed. The new motive power is economic rather than religious; some revival of passive heathenism is an ingredient. The price of copra, regulated by the combines far away in Europe, has become in many ways the determining factor. During the period of my visit copra prices reached their lowest level. The missionized natives have become dependent on their coconuts to earn them money for knives, calico, tobacco, belts, even bread, rice, and tinned meat—the substitutes for "heathen" things that have become extinct through mission influence. Low prices mean little money and a standard of living reduced below the level of the last thirty years, in many ways below that of the heathen bushmen. This annoys the native against the white, who has created these demands and will not satisfy them; and a shirt has become the essential symbol of a mission native, to such an extent that without a shirt he feels no longer Christian. I doubt if the group has within sight an important economic future for the white man, despite the recent optimistic accounts of Archimbaud (1927) and Lop (1933). The Chinese and Japanese are rapidly gaining economic power; they may find in these fever- and cyclone-ridden islands an important outlet. Half-castes are not numerous. French ones rank equal with pure Frenchmen as citizens, and run many French plantations.

Recently the administration have to some extent changed their policy, for example in relation to trouble within the native community and in appointing me to pacify the Big Nambas. The native will therefore expect more arbitration in future; if it is not provided, the administration will be discredited, to the danger of all whites.

So the age-long cycle goes on. The native population was never stable, either in culture or in numbers. When Quiros came the population was about at a peak in the north; now it has reached a trough, on the interminable up and down of all races. It is time for the Melanesian to climb again. He is climbing wherever conditions are at all favourable. And the vital question

now, to those of us interested in the deeper aspects of human life, is whether the real *bush* Melanesian, still with some awareness of his own magnificent past, will start to climb again before it is too late. I believe that with a little help he too can be saved along with his already secure Christian brother.

Conservation of the Primitive Melanesian

The inland bush people of Santo, Malekula, and to a lesser extent Ambrym and Pentecost, are the least civilized natives in the Pacific to-day. A few places in the Solomons are comparable to some extent, while here and there in Polynesia, for example in the eastern Tuamotus, the old spirit remains under the new clothing. Elsewhere the "South-sea islander" is no longer anything like his old self. All Polynesia has reached the calico stage; in the New Hebrides the calico stage has not touched central Malekula; the stone age is quite finished everywhere. And in the east the boot age is dawning.

What should happen to these least-influenced Big Nambas, Laus, and Botowut folk? What will happen is an easier question. Unless some very vigorous and powerful person takes up the matter at once they will not be primitive any more. They will be extinct culturally through plantation and later-mission influence, when they have been finally reduced to near physical extinction by introduced epidemic diseases. I doubt if anything can check the material superficial advance of our civilization. It may be possible in a well-run country like New Guinea. With the Condominium it is quite impracticable to have any complex plan.

(i) *Physical Conservation*.—The problem has two parts, physical and cultural conservation. That is why I am against isolation, which would now be no use in a part of the world where disease is the first enemy and where incompatible vested interests dominate. I am not in favour of Baker's (*Geogr. J.*, 1929) suggested reserve on Gaua. Gaua is a particularly unsuitable island because the natives are decadent, very missionized, and unhealthy; none of the old culture remains. The trouble is that an island like Gaua is already too isolated; it has all the evils and none of the good things of Europeanism. Even in 1896 Bishop Wilson (1932, p. 91) noted that "these people are akin to the rest of the Banks Islanders, and yet so greatly inferior; it is difficult to say why, and it is the same on both sides of the island." The detailed study made by Mrs. Baker and myself will be published elsewhere, and may explain why.

Similarly the inland tribes on the larger islands cannot be isolated from epidemics spreading up from the coast. If the bushmen were isolated to-day they would go on steadily dying out: not from the lack of the will to live or zest of life (the widely accepted theory first put forward by Rivers), but from definite diagnostic disease. The only way to preserve them as human beings, let alone in their semi-primitive state, is by immediate medical and hygienic action; by perhaps a party of tropical medical men, including native medical practitioners from Fiji. Eucalyptus, neokarsarvin, hookworm medicine, emetine are necessary. Even the wildest natives have heard about the wonderful benefits derived from these drugs. Lepers must be isolated. The administration should do this; partly through lack of funds its medical service does practically nothing; the missionaries do very useful work in a limited sphere,

but they do not attempt to help the heathens, unless the heathens come down to the often unhealthy coast and adopt the externals of Christianity. The Missions do not go to the natives, and in Santo, Malekula, and Malo, out of about six thousand Christians, only thirty live away from the sea. In the hills there is no malaria, consumption, or elephantiasis; when the hill-men come to the sea they quickly go down with fever, and the slightest additional sickness will kill them. Mission history is a ghastly list of great settlements created by the Missions on the coast, and now almost or entirely extinct. Aneityum, west Malekula, and west Santo show plenty of examples. I have already made the point that it is similarly fatal for missions to neglect their converts in outlying districts; this is done all over the group. The recruiters do the same



thing, only in a different way, by taking bush natives to work in plantations; they are more concerned to keep their men well, because if a man dies his tribe will not work for that recruiter any more. Long ago Anthony Trollope wrote a delightful account of the benefits due to Queensland blackbirding; Campbell (1874, p. 69), whose account of the southern isles in 1864 is lucid and unbiased, demonstrated the fallacy in Trollope's reasoning, and further pointed out that ex-plantation natives often become the most dangerous on their return to the bush, which is equally true to-day, especially of trained native police.

In my section of the Big Nambas I have shown that modern warfare, unlike the old form, is socially harmful; all natives should be disarmed; vigorous medical work started and maintained throughout the islands; the fish Bam-

buria introduced to destroy mosquito larvae; the movements of hill people to the sea controlled; no women should be allowed to work on a plantation. If these steps are taken the physical conservation of the bushman may be achieved. 000

The cultural conservation technique cannot be expressed so concretely. It is too late to preserve the pattern complete. There is however a good alternative, and I can best give my point of view by describing a concrete example of what can happen with proper guidance or good luck, as on the island of Atchin.

(ii) *Atchin, 1935.*—There is no doubt that on small islands a mile or less across health is much better and *Anopheles* mosquitoes are often absent. They are the small island populations which are increasing most rapidly throughout the group, though some are still decreasing, and in these islands I see the best future of the race. Most have mainly mission populations, but on some heathens are dominant. One such is Atchin, half a mile off the east coast of Malekula; of the four hundred and eighty natives less than two dozen are Christians. A Seventh Day Adventist missionary lived there for many years, and all the other missions maintain native teachers there. The missions have had no success, but the natives got some ideas from them which they have incorporated into their own culture. More valuable has proved the visit of an anthropologist, John W. Layard. He was there more than twenty years ago, but to this day is remembered as 'Tsoni (Johnny). He gained a remarkable understanding of the Atchinese, and his sympathy greatly encouraged the people to keep up their old heathen customs. Like all Hebrideans, the Atchinese sold land to the whites for a few guns in the early days. Unlike all the rest, they have since bought it back. Their country is their own. As their yam gardens are on the mainland, they are expert canoeists; they still keep up the old canoe voyages to Ambrym, trading penis-wrappers for pigs; to Malo, Santo, and east Malekula. The old turmeric-dye leaf trade has been taken over by French ships, and for some years now there has been no ritual sex-initiation voyage to Omba, home of the benign deity 'Ta-har (= 'Tagaro). 16A
The best fishermen, whole villages club their copra together to get a modern European drag net; but do not let decay the ancient stone-wall trap, a sort of lobster-pot, and the special handnets for the Palolo worm, which at certain seasons appears in millions, giving its name to three of the lunar months. 16B
They run their own stores and sell their own copra to the highest bidder of the several ships that call in search of this lucrative trade. They encourage whites to visit but not to stop. They make sham spears to sell to world-touring yachts which call regularly to see these remarkably safe savages; the real spears they do not show. They have twice done all their dances for film companies, in no way to the detriment of the dance culture or significance, rather the opposite. Baker (1935, p. 212) says of the Sakaus, Santo: "If they had been persuaded to dance for the tourists it would have been the beginning of the break-up of their culture, in which dancing plays an important part. . . . The prostitution of their culture by tourists would be deleterious not only to themselves but also to social anthropology." Apart from the fact that the Sakaus have unfortunately lost, almost forgotten, the whole dance-cycle of the highest chiefly grade (*vuster*), and that the special dance for the marriage of a 16C
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648 chief's daughter has been given up for years, Atchin contradicts his theory in
fact. Baker I think underestimates the vanity of the native.

183 The Atchinese are among the very few peoples friendly to the administration, and they now appeal at once for peaceful settlements to all disputes. In the old days they gave a lot of trouble, but living on a small island they found a warship was more significant to them than to the bushmen. War is no more, abortion uncommon; the older men consciously want the place to grow; and grow it does. Thus it was the Atchinese who drew my attention to the exorbitantly high pig payments demanded as bride price all over the area in recent years; with their support I was able to lower the price by 80 per cent., back to pre-white level, thus enabling young men to marry with only normal difficulty. Similarly these folk like European medicines for introduced diseases, but use their own for the endemic ones. Their pig transactions and graded-society (*Maki*) rites have been modified; some things have been taken away, others added, both from white and black sources.

183 Atchin dances are second only to those of Matanavat; they are kept up with exactitude and enthusiasm; also with new and often spontaneous variations in one type of the *na-leng*, the highest manifestation of Hebridean art and living. Sorcery and poison are no longer tolerated; the Atchinese are bitter against the adjacent island Vao for continuing these practices—bitter, but not disbelieving. Magic is not now important; old legends and stories, in which these people excel, are a part of daily life and juvenile instruction; the same myths collected by Layard and myself in 1914 and 1935 respectively agree perfectly, there has been no deterioration. The old burial rites and beliefs survive unimpaired.

184 In general the old customs that are savage or anti-social under modern conditions have disappeared, while those with business, religious, health, or play value have survived, even expanded. It is in this Europeanized heathenism, this intelligently primitive and adaptive but obstinate outlook, that the ancient Melanesian culture is most likely and able to survive. On Atchin to-day every village has its great drums, in lovely dancing glades, dolmens, carved human and bird effigies; a little distance away behind a native-style stone wall is a cluster of palm houses kept clean; at one corner perhaps a cement and iron house, the men's lodge, pride of the place. The women have more status, charm, freedom, and gaiety than elsewhere in the area.

181 I found the Atchinese charming people—and charm is a word I seldom think of applying to a Melanesian. They are thoroughly independent and sophisticated, combining Melanesian business ability with a more Polynesian intelligence and grace to direct it. The planters and missionaries have no good word to say for Atchin, which is an indication. Few tribes have had the good luck and intelligence to use the white man's things for their own advantage, in harmony with their own culture. I believe that what the Hebridean needs most to-day is guidance in this direction associated with simple medical aid. New education, religion and outlet are unnecessary and inadvisable now, and perhaps for some time to come. A few sympathetic men and women, without undue prejudice, could with a little money and many medicines work wonders. Atchin might well serve as a model in cultural adaptation. It

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Atchin

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is therefore important to place on record the earlier, primitive basis upon which this adaptation has evolved. Mr. Layard has kindly consented to my request to add an account of Atchin conditions at the time of his visit. 181

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